

3/25/01.
email to Ballats

see 3/23 drafts
email to Varmus.

The letter you faxed me on March 20 served a very constructive purpose for the meeting of the PubMedC' advisory council on Wednesday. We talked about very little else. I am also glad we had the (fortuitous) chance to exchange a few words from Harold Varmus' cell phone as we were taxi-ing to the NLM. I am responding asap in a personal vein. When the minutes are compiled, I'll be sure they are copied to you. Meanwhile, Nick Cozzarelli can also communicate the tenure of our meeting.

Right off the start: no organization is better qualified to speak as a representative of the interests of U.S. science and scientists than the Academies. This is very gratifyingly exemplified by your policies about posting of and free online access to the PNAS. Besides its moral force, its success as a business model, based on authorial page charges is an indispensable example (and reassurance) to the public-service oriented sector of the scientific publishing industry. So it is imperative that the PMC initiative be in close partnership with the NAS in making "access to the scientific literature barrier-free".

We certainly hope you will have the time and schedule opportunity to join with the advisory council yourself at its next meeting on October 10.

With regard to the navigational and search questions you raised: yes PMC has a ways to go, but there are new capabilities that may not have been obvious to you. David Lipman will follow up with you for an opportunity to exercise these on your own terminal, and demo' to the council, at mutual convenience. He will also brief you on expectations for ongoing improvement, technically, and in the recruitment of other journals to the consortium.

Our committee also went into much deeper and broader policy directions, that will be of great interest to you and the NAS Council. We are still crystallizing these into formal language; and I will leave it to Nick to brief you on the tenor of discussions. Contrary to misleading imputations lodged against PMC, it does not at all demand monopoly rights (exclusive access) through its medium. It will be working towards reasonable compromises on doctrine: e.g. proprietary hold on texts for a reasonable period of time, so as to quell anxieties about undercutting subscription sales for initial print editions. We also understand why publishers may prefer to display their product on their own sites; and PMC will still offer services accomodating that aim (early search and retrieval at a single outlet) that if anything should enhance the visibility of each publisher's offering. All important is, of course, maximizing access by scientific users throughout the world.

There is some division of opinion about how far to centralize. I am not certain we can yet anticipate the last word on the merits and practicality of decentralized energies, if good coordination machinery can be put in place. I think you will agree that the archiving responsibility is at risk if there is not some form of central repository as backup in case of technical or economic default of providers. Archival reassurance should be a positive incentive for cooperation with PMC. In addition, collectively agreed standards will ease the burden of users in their task of search and retrieval, of exploring the whole universe of published knowledge on which they are expected to rely in furthering new discovery.

I hope you will communicate to the Council our view that

- a). Current policies re PNAS are an enormous contribution, lighting the way.
- b) PMC is part of an ongoing experiment, in which PNAS at minimum can play a vital role, at very little cost. That participation does not, from PMC's perspective, interfere with PNAS relating to HighWire or any other provider, as long as scientists' interests are protected.
- c) PMC technical performance must meet some very complex criteria for standardization, if archiving is to be reliable. It can use your help in also defining current user-friendliest interfaces.

There are many entrenched interests who would gloat at implied repudiation of PMC on the part of the NAS. I know that you and the Council will be responsive to the members' (and community's) interests. Conversely, PMC will be eager to have well informed inputs from you and from the NAS membership and policy apparatus on guidance for the PMC's evolution, and its part in collective efforts to bring scientific communication into the 21st Century.

Joshua